

Historian looks for accounts on Japanese internment camp

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BOISE, Idaho — A remote World War II internment camp in north-central Idaho held hundreds of men of Japanese descent before it vanished, leaving little more than cobwebs for historian Priscilla Wegars to trace.

It was at a Washington State University lecture on the American internment camps a couple of years ago that Wegars first heard about the camp.

Someone asked about the fate of internees held along the Lochsa River near Lowell.

"She said, 'We went down to the station in Kooskia to watch them come in on the train,'" recalls Wegars, curator of the Asian American Comparative Collection at the University of Idaho.

The search begins

Surprised, the private researcher started looking for any scrap of information about the ephemeral forest camp.

"I wondered if I could find enough," she said. "We visited the site. There's nothing there. The buildings were torn down and there's nothing to see."

But between May 1943 and May 1945, the so-called enemy aliens were taken by rail to Kooskia. Although there were some Japanese-Americans and a few citizens of Latin American countries, former camp guard Cecil Boller believes most were Japanese fisherman picked up off the West Coast.

They were put into trucks and shuttled about 30 miles to the camp that earlier housed federal prisoners working on U.S. Highway 12.

Information scarce

Federal records show as many as 378 people, all adult men, were detained there for some time. Many were later transferred to other camps.

"I've found more than I thought I would," Wegars said. "Maybe it's because it was not that long ago. But the material is scattered. I'm having a hard time finding the internees who were there."

Wegars learned the average age at Kooskia was 37, so many of the people she seeks would be elderly today. One Florida man in his 90s is too frail to interview, but she is still following a lead on a man now living in Alaska.

In 1942, President Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing 10 relocation centers throughout the country to house 120,000 people — first-generation immigrants called Issei, and their second-generation American-born children, or Nisei.

Life under guard

The Kooskia camp and Fort Missoula in Montana were managed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Boise State University history professor Robert Sims said that indicates the government viewed them as a relatively high security risk.

The War Relocation Authority oversaw the others,

including southern Idaho's Minidoka Internment Camp where thousands of people were warehoused.

The Kooskia camp had five barracks buildings and a kitchen. There were 27 Caucasian employees, mostly guards like Boller. Some internees worked on the highway for \$3.10 a day, or in the camp kitchen for \$1.

"It's in a very isolated area. Apparently, the men could fish on the Lochsa River, and if they had a guard to accompany them, they could go to Kooskia or Lewiston to shop."

But, she said, "they were prisoners even if the guards had no guns. If you were a Japanese person in a small Idaho town at that time, it was a dangerous place to be."

Hardships everywhere

The internees realized they were safer in camp than among Americans living through the hardships of war in the Pacific. Boller recalled, and security was lax because of it.

"They could have gone on down the road if they wanted," said Boller, now 83 and still living in Kooskia. "But they read the paper and knew they didn't want to leave."

Most of the internees nationwide lost everything in the war and had little choice about work. Some left the camps if an employer on the outside guaranteed them a job.

And just as quietly as they were brought to Kooskia, the last of the internees left as the war drew to an end.

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